

Coping with disorder: managing national, regional and transnational challenges to peace and stability in Asia

Anthony Bubalo

Deputy Director and Research Director, Lowy Institute for International Policy

Thank you, Ambassador Nishida. It's a real honor to be here in Hiroshima. Thank you very much for the invitation. And good afternoon and welcome to all. My presentation today is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will be talking about the global trends and the global challenges to peacebuilding to try and set the challenges for peacebuilding in Asia in a broader context. The second part of my presentation will look at Asian challenges to peacebuilding. And the final part will look at some of the things that Asian governments need to do to overcome those future challenges that we face.

I want to start with something written by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm. Hobsbawm was a Marxist. Marxists tend to be very bad economic planners, but very good historians. Eric Hobsbawm in reviewing the history of the 20th century divided it into three ages or three parts. The first part, he called the age of catastrophe from 1914 to 1947 covering the period of the two World Wars. The second part or the second age, he called the Golden Age from 1947 to 1973 in which despite the Cold War, the world saw a period of great economic growth of great technological change, but also massive

improvements in health and in literacy.

And finally, the last part of the 20th century, the third age, Hobsbawm called the landslide. This was the period in which the Soviet Union collapsed, in which capitalism had its great victory over communism. But it was also a period of cycles of boom and bust amongst the capitalist economies and a period during which globalization accelerated. And as a result of that acceleration, eroded the authority and the sovereignty of nation states. It was also the beginning of a period accompanying the expansion of globalization where we saw a growing gap between rich and poor.

That was the 20th century. If I were to extend Hobsbawm's categorizations to the current century, I would say that we are living today in the age of discontent. It's an age when many of the trends that Hobsbawm identified in the last quarter of the 20th century have become crises marked by growing discontent with the established order within states and between states. Hobsbawm argued that the last 25 years of the 20th century saw a decline in the power and the authority of the state in both the developed and the developing world. In the developing world, states which were

already known for having a weak ability to provide for the economic security, political, and social needs of the citizens, that inability was becoming more acute whilst even in the developed world, governments were losing control of national economies largely as a result of globalization. Where countries used to make things, and make them whole themselves, countries were quickly becoming manufacturers of components of things that were assembled elsewhere.

In the last 10 years, the trends that Hobsbawm identified have become crises to varying degrees in different parts of the world. Discontent with the state has turned into dissent, sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent. And we see many examples of this. The global financial crisis in 2008 exposed the extent to which national governments had lost control of their national economies. The failure of the financial system and the regulatory system in the United States caused recession in many of the world's major economies.

We've also seen in the last 10 years in the Arab uprisings, the failure of the post-colonial Arab state. We saw the collapse of a number of states and serious fractures exposed in others. In the refugee crisis in Europe, we see exposed different elements of state weakness. On the one hand, the inability of states in Africa and the Middle East to provide security or the livelihoods of their citizens who have therefore voted with their feet and chosen to go elsewhere and on

the other hand, the inability of European states to control their own borders which has undermined the confidence of their citizens in their governments.

We saw that in the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom which underlined the popular discontent, not just with the political class, but also with globalization. Indeed, even in the United States, the wealthiest country in the world, we see in the rise of Donald Trump that it too is succumbing to protectionist and nativist sentiment. Now of course, we should not be too bleak. The world is not at war and less people are dying in conflict at the start of this century than we were dying in conflict at the start of the last one. Indeed, the irony is that these outbreaks of dissent and conflict have come at a time when the world as a whole is more prosperous than it has ever been, is richer than it has ever been. Globalization has lifted millions of people out of poverty especially in Asia. But if globalization has produced winners, it also produces losers. And some countries, some groups, and some individuals have gotten richer, others have gotten poorer. But it's not just a matter of growing inequality although inequality has grown.

One vivid example of this globalization is also redistributing power and wealth, countries, groups and individuals that were once haves have become have nots and vice versa. One example of this is the rust belt voters in the United States who are supporting Donald Trump or even Bernie Sanders. These are

people that had secure long term jobs usually in manufacturing that have gone offshore, those jobs have gone offshore including many to Asia. There are other examples of this kind of globalization induced discontent. Globalization has made China rich, but it has also made China more assertive in pursuit of its interests, because it now has the power to pursue those interests whether these are for the sovereignty it claims for maritime territories or for a greater position in global economic governance.

Globalization has made Islamist terrorism a global problem rather than a regional one limited to the Middle East, because terrorists can travel and can use social media and the internet to spread their ideas and attract supporters and imitators. Globalization has been the driver of the mass migration of people, many of which are attracted to better economic opportunities that as a result of globalization, they know are elsewhere. And finally, globalization has made it more difficult to tackle transnational challenges such as climate change as the developed and the developing world squabble over who should carry the greater burden in efforts to tackle this problem.

All of these problems are weakening the state further. States have less power and less authority. As a result, their citizens grow more disillusioned and become more susceptible to cynical and populous political leaders. Of course, this is not to say that all conflict is driven by

these factors. There are particular national elements to all of these conflicts and local factors are always very strong. But there is also a lot more in common than we think between these challenges including between challenges that develop and developing states face even if the challenges in some states are not as acute as they are in others. We see for example in the rise of Islamic State in Syria, it's not just a phenomenon that is confined to Syria and Iraq. It is not just young Syrian and Iraqi men and women joining Islamic State. But it is also not just young men and women from the Arab Muslim world that are joining Islamic State. It is young men and women from throughout the Islamic world including from predominantly non-Muslim western countries. And you even have the phenomenon of people who are recent converts to Islam that are joining Islamic State. Where once this problem might have been, local and limited to a country or region, these problems are now shared problems which brings me now to Asia.

It's tempting to see Asia as being largely immune to what I've termed this age of dissent. In my current job, I focus on both the Middle East and Asia. And when I get tired of the chaos in the Middle East, I try and focus a bit more on Asia as a bit of relief. Asia, of course has been a particular beneficiary of globalization and while it is not conflict free, since the 1980s at least it has been relatively peaceful or has managed conflicts reasonably well as we heard in the first session and also in Daniel's

presentation. I feel however this is changing and I want to look at this at three levels; national, regional, and transnational. At the national level when you think about the issue of state weakness, it's fair to say that there are plenty of other parts in the world that you think of instead of Asia. Of course, you think of Africa, you think of the Middle East, you even think of South America before you think of Asia although Asia also has its fair share of domestic problems including separatist conflicts and insurgencies and tensions between neighbors. There is a reasonably long list, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Burma, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Korean peninsula, and others.

The nation state in Asia does not appear to be in crisis even though there are plenty of states in the region particularly in South Asia and Southeast Asia where the state has weaknesses, deficiencies, and gaps, even China where as I said economic growth and globalization has lifted millions of people out of poverty. This has had enormous positive consequences for China. But it also had some negative ones including for pollution of the environment, for the generation of corruption, for resource depletion and for a rapid rate of urbanization that is testing the ability of the Chinese authorities to manage. As we know, economic growth cannot be sustained forever. And the question is certainly for China, but also for other countries in the region, what happens when that growth starts to dip? What political crisis will that

situation start to create?

In Southeast Asia, we also see growing income gaps that have in the past and will continue in the future to promote conflict. We see in Burma, Myanmar, the conflict involving the Rohingya people that has seen a significant outflow of Rohingya refugees. State failure in North Korea is making tension with South Korea and other neighbors worse. At a regional level, there is also an understandable focus on the rise of China and on its relations with its neighbors and with the United States. As I said globalization has helped to life millions of Chinese out of poverty. It has made China wealthier, more powerful, and more influential. But it has also made it more assertive. For example, it is clear that one of the reasons that China has become more assertive in its maritime claims is that it now has the power to protect and project its interests which it didn't have before.

But China also illustrates the relationship between national and regional challenges. It seems very clear that China's new assertiveness is also partly being driven by a concern by the Chinese authorities to protect the central position of the Chinese Communist Party. And they are concerned that as economic growth stalls and declines, they will face growing pressures from the Chinese people. And for that reason, they are using Chinese nationalism as an alternative to economic growth as a way to keep people happy. Of course, we need to keep these things in

perspective. We are not faced in Asia yet, thank goodness with the Cold War, with the situation that we saw in Europe in the second half of the 20th century. But the fact that it's not a Cold War also in some ways makes it more difficult to manage. In the situation of the Cold War, we know where the wall is, we know who our adversaries are and we know that the likelihood of conflict is both high and its potentially devastating. So, we do the things that we can to try and avoid and prevent those conflicts.

The current situation we face with China is neither a Cold War nor is it a cooperative relationship. We are still trying to work out what kind of China will emerge. Will it be the China that we hope for? A responsible, active, economic, and political partner in global affairs? Or will it be the China that we fear, a powerful, assertive, power seeking pre-eminent in Asia? And because we don't know which of the Chinas will emerge, we are not yet practiced in trying to develop those mechanisms and those means to deal with conflict to avoid misperceptions and misunderstandings. We don't have the safeguards that we had in the Cold War.

Finally, at the transnational level, we see how transnational challenges are also both proving a challenge for Asia, but also potentially promoting conflict within it. Climate change, there is no part of the world that can hide from climate change. It's both a threat in itself, but also has the potential to promote tension and conflict as

it promotes potentially competition for resources particularly water and food as it provokes internal conflicts in those countries that are threatened by rising sea levels or by other environmental impacts. Terrorism, we understand is not just a Middle Eastern problem. There are small, but significant numbers of Muslims from Asian countries, particularly from Southeast Asia travelling to Syria and Iraq to cooperate with Islamic State. And most importantly, to obtain the kinds of skills that could potentially see the reemergence of Syria's terrorism problem in Southeast Asia.

And finally, the people movement, we should not assume that simply because at the moment much of the world's people movement seems to be focused on Europe that Asian countries won't in the future also become a focus for that kind of movement. That brings to my final section. And that is what do we do about these problems. And there are two points that I want to emphasize here and in many respects, they are very similar to the points that Daniel made. What we've demonstrated I think in the last 5 to 10 years is that when we try and attempt to do peacebuilding after conflicts, we are not very good at it. Certainly, the interventions in Afghanistan, in Iraq and elsewhere have had their successes. But it's fair to say that on balance, they've had more failures.

What this means is that our focus increasingly and particularly as we deal with these conflicts, couplings, challenges

have to be on prevention. We see this particularly with the European refugee crisis. That refugee crisis was caused by the Syrian civil war. That crisis came to a head last year. But it was very clear in 2011 that first the Syrian civil war was going to be bloody and violent and long. And second, that as is normally the case with such conflicts, it would see growing numbers of refugees, first internally displaced and then, attempting to leave the country. So, Europe had 4 years to prepare for this and did very, very little. It was in many respects a great failure of preventative action. But prevention is very difficult. These are complex issues, no single country, not even the world's most powerful country can handle them on their own.

That means that international cooperation becomes extremely important. The advantage for Asia in all of this is that Asia has time and it has the experience of other regions of the world. There are elements that I think in terms of trying to build cooperation to prevent conflict that need to be emphasized. There needs to be a cooperative effort to assist and prioritize those challenges and threats that most threaten the international system and most require some work to prevent them from

becoming full scale conflicts. There is a need for long term work and for working with locals rather than coming with our own fully formed plans to countries that we barely understand. There needs to be a focus on governance and economic sustainability. Bad governance and poor economic opportunities are not the only cause of conflict. But what they do is act like an amplifier. So, those few small ideologically driven people who drive conflict, who spread fear, they capitalize on situations of poor governance and poor economic development.

Cooperation also has a useful side benefit and Daniel mentioned that earlier. Not only is it important as a mechanism to deal with these challenges, but it can also diminish suspicion between countries by focusing their efforts on tackling common problems. I agree with him particularly in the fields of disaster relief, potentially terrorism. And as we've already seen on climate change, there are great opportunities for China and the US to cooperate. In fact, on this issue that is perhaps the most challenging in terms of peace in Asia, we have a choice. We have a choice between preparing for conflict with China or preventing it. And I think we should focus on the latter. Thank you.